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AUTHOR	Schwartz, Wendy
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ABSTRACT

Homeless parents, like all parents, want their children to have a good education, and most are eager to help in any way they can. Some suggestions are offered for helping homeless parents become partners in their children's education. Parent concerns should be addressed directly. They should be assured that their children can learn, that schools will treat them fairly, that services like meal programs and social service referrals are not a sign of inferiority, and that schools take safety issues seriously. In addition, homeless parents should be told about services schools offer for parents, such as adult education and job training. Ways to involve parents begin with explaining to them why their involvement is important and encouraging activities that help them help their children. Parent participation and volunteering can be especially valuable in urban schools, where assets may be limited and many homeless people are located. Parents at a shelter may need special reassurance and information that tells them their rights and explains the opportunities available through the school. (SLD)

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for parents, about parents

A GUIDE TO PROMOTING CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN HOMELESS FAMILIES

CS 030 955

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Homeless parents, like all parents, want their children to get a good education so they can have happy and productive adulthoods. Most are also eager to help their children in any way they can.

Some parents may need special help in supporting their children. They may feel intimidated by schools and school people because of embarrassment over their lack of education or ability to speak English. Others, if their own education experiences were bad, may just not want to go back into a school for any reason at all. Finally, unlike most other parents, homeless parents often must focus their attention totally on solving immediate problems, so they may not automatically realize the value of a long-term goal like seeing their children graduate from high school.

It is important to help homeless parents overcome these obstacles because children receive an important message about the value of schooling when their parents participate in school activities. In addition, parents can benefit personally from school involvement. But while schools always encourage parent involvement, they may not be able to devote a lot of resources to recruiting hard-to-reach parents.

Community groups, on the other hand, are often able to raise funds to develop and manage their own parent projects, and they can work with schools to support homeless families both in schools and in shelters.

Below are some suggestions for helping homeless parents become partners in their children's education.

Parent Concerns

Homeless parents may have beliefs based on experience or misinformation that keep them from encouraging their children to go to school. For example, victims of, and witnesses to, violence may be reluctant to be separated from their children, and victims of domestic violence may be wary of sending their children to a place with public access. These ideas should be addressed directly:

- Just because parents had academic or social problems in school doesn't mean that their children will. Schools now have many new ways to help children learn, adjust socially, and recover from emotional trauma.
- Schools treat homeless children and their families just as fairly and with just as much respect as other, more fortunate, families, and they will try to ensure that all adults and children in the school community do so as well.
- It is part of a school's job to provide non-educational services like meal programs and social service referrals. Accepting them isn't a sign of inferiority and shouldn't be a reason for shame.
- Schools try to provide information and support in a parent's native language, and they work to help all parents understand what they need to know.
- Schools take safety issues very seriously and do everything they can to protect children while they are at school. Schools also do all they can to keep student information confidential, and they respect custodial parents' instructions about family members who should or should not have access to their children or their records.
- Schools offer adult education, job training, and social service programs that can benefit parents.

Ways to Involve Parents

There are a variety of ways for school personnel and parent educators to help make parents partners in their children's education, including inviting them to participate in group activities or suggesting ways for them to work directly with their own children. Here are some examples:

- Explain why discussing their children's educational progress with teachers is important, and encourage attendance at parent-teacher conferences.
- Invite parents to participate in discussion groups and PTA projects.
- Plan interesting programs—at school, in shelters, or at local meeting places—on parenting, job readiness and training, availability of services, overcoming substance abuse, etc. Include time for simply sharing experiences and socializing, and offer refreshments.
- Enlist parents to get students onto buses or to otherwise help them arrive at school on time. Such requests also makes clear the importance of prompt and regular attendance.
- Work with parents to read with their children and discuss the books. This activity also increases parents' literacy.
- Help parents make daily activities a learning experience. For example, make shopping a mathematics lesson by comparing prices, estimating the total cost of all purchases in advance, deducting the cost of items from the amount of food stamps the family has.
- Provide parent-child/adolescent counseling to improve family relationships.

If possible, help parents with transportation and child care arrangements. Providing these services can significantly increase their attendance at meetings and events.

Parent Activities in School

Since urban schools are usually understaffed, contributions of time from parents can be quite valuable, and well worth recruitment and training efforts. Parents can also benefit from coming to school to serve as volunteers or to work part-time in several ways:

- Having a commitment, and believing that they are needed and wanted, is motivating.
- The educational environment can renew parents' interest in their own schooling or job training.
- Work in school develops job readiness skills.
- Volunteer work can be listed as experience on a job application.

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In addition to enlisting parents as volunteers, schools and community groups can seek grants from local businesses and agencies to hire parents for part-time positions in schools. Jobs include:

- Bus, hall, and extended day program monitors.
- Lunchroom and library helpers.
- Trip chaperons.
- Resource and support staff for homeless students and their families. Parents can visit shelters to encourage and facilitate school enrollment. In schools they can staff rooms with resources especially for homeless students.
- Program coordination (for tutoring, mentoring, and "buddy" programs).
- Soliciting in-kind contributions from community businesses and organizations (school supplies, clothing, etc.).

Working with Parents in Shelters

Parents new at a shelter may feel overwhelmed. They may appreciate a visit from a group that can provide useful information about schooling for their children. Long-term parent residents who are unable to come to school, and who may not be encouraging their children's attendance, can also benefit from visits. Groups can be comprised of community service staff, school people, and/or other parents (including homeless parents). There is even a national organization of senior citizens that sends out volunteer "grandparents." The purposes of the visits include:

- Presentation of information about school enrollment, the rights of homeless students, adult education opportunities, health and social services, etc.
- Collection of information and records on children's medical and education status.
- Family storytelling, where parents and children tell about their lives. This activity builds cultural pride, develops imagination, and improves communication skills.
- Tutoring for both parents and children.
- Day care, so parents have time for job- and apartment-searching.
- Family trips to new schools, local points of interest, cultural institutions, service centers, etc.

This guide was written by Wendy Schwartz. A companion publication is ***School Programs and Practices for Homeless Students****, a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a list of other publications.*

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You will find these guides in the Urban/Minority Families section of the Urban Education Web (UEweb), at http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu. You can reach other sections of the NPIN Web through UEweb or at http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/npinhome.html. The NPIN Gopher is at ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
800/601-4868
Fax: 212/678-4012
Internet: eric-cue@columbia.edu